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THE GREBES OF SOUTHERN OREGON

By WILLIAM L. FINLEY

WITH PHOTOGRAPHS BY HERMAN T. BOHLMAN

FOR years the lake region of southern Oregon was the most profitable field in the west for the plume hunter. Up to the summer of 1903 many, many thousands of grebes and terns were slaughtered thru this region to supply the millinery market. Scores of professional hunters shot these birds and shipped out bales of the skins till now there are comparatively few of these birds left about Lower Klamath and Tule Lakes. This traffic in bird skins has been checked, but it has never been stopped.

After spending almost two months cruising these lakes during the summer of 1905, we found but one colony of Caspian Terns (*Sterna caspia*) on the Lower Klamath, and two small colonies of Forster Terns (*Sterna forsteri*), one at the north end of Tule Lake and the other along Klamath River. The American Black Tern (*Hydrochelidon nigra surinamensis*) nested in the same colonies with the Forster Tern and were even more common.

Formerly these velvet-plumaged birds were very common thruout this lake region. A peculiar habit of the terns would soon have led to their extinction. As soon as a hunter winged one of them and it fell fluttering to the water, instead of the other terns flying away, they hovered about excited and inquisitive and were shot as fast as the hunter could re-load. The wings and tail were all that the hunters used from the body of the tern and these netted about forty cents a bird.

The Western Grebe (*Aechmophorus occidentalis*) was the greatest sufferer at the hands of the market hunter. This diver, of the glistening-white breast and the silvery-gray back was sought not without reason. The grebe hunters call the skin of this bird fur rather than feathers, because it is so tough it can be scraped and handled like a hide, and because of the thick warm plumage that seems much

more like the fur of a mammal than the skin of a bird. These skins when prepared and placed on the market in the form of coats and capes, brought the prices of the most expensive furs.

A grebe is a bird that is difficult to shoot, because it swims so low in the water and is so quick in its movements. The professional hunters use a special gun that shoots a charge of shot within the area of a foot square at a distance of about forty yards. The favorite way of shooting was from a blind along the channel where the birds went back and forth from the feeding grounds, or many of the hunters thought nothing of going right among the colonies where the birds were nesting.

Formerly the greatest grebe rookeries were found in the tules on the north side of Tule Lake, but the hunters have left few birds in this locality. The only really large colony that we found was on Lower Klamath Lake, and that had probably not been disturbed by hunters. We estimated that there were several thousand grebes nesting about this part of the Lake. A year later, during the summer of 1906, Mr. Frank Chapman visited this same locality and found scarcely any of these



A CORNER IN THE WESTERN GREBE COLONY; ONE BIRD IS STANDING ON ITS NEST

birds left; for market hunters were camped not far away.

Lower Klamath Lake is a body of water about twenty-five miles long by ten or twelve miles wide. About its sides are great marshes of tules. The whole border is a veritable jungle: extending out for several miles from the main shore is an almost endless area of floating tule islands, between which is a network of channels. Here, where we found the nesting colony of Western Grebes, we had good chances to study the habits of these birds.

About one of these islands we found the floating grebe nests every few feet apart, and counted over sixty in a short distance. We rowed up to one end and landed and then waded along just inside the thick growth of tules that grew along the edge. From this place, partly concealed as we were, we could look thru the tules and see the grebes swimming and diving near their nests. Across the channel along the edge of the opposite island were many more grebe nests, and some of the birds were sitting on their eggs.

The nesting habits of the Western Grebe vary somewhat from those of the

American Eared Grebe. On both sides of the Klamath River is a vast area of low land covered at this season with two or three feet of water. Here we found an occasional nest of the American Eared Grebe (*Colymbus nigricollis californicus*), but nowhere did this bird nest in colonies. The nests were made of rotten weeds that had been pulled together and left floating on the surface. During the day the parents always seemed to be away and the eggs were covered with a layer of wet weeds. It had always been a wonder to me how eggs could ever be hatched when they were lying partially in the water and covered with the damp reeds. I pulled off the top covering and felt underneath, and the platform was warm all the way thru, even to the water below. The heat of the sun on the decaying reeds warms the whole nest so that the eggs are kept about at body heat.

The nests of the Western Grebe were, as a rule, built up of dry reeds higher out of the water than those of the Eared Grebe. I never saw a case where this bird covered its eggs with reeds while it was away. Many times we saw them sitting on their eggs during the day. In other cases, they seemed to leave the eggs to be hatched out partly by the sun. The usual number of eggs we found in a set were three and four, altho we often found six and seven. In several cases, we found places among the dry tules where an extra large set of eggs had been laid. We saw sixteen eggs in one set, but there had been no attempt at a nest, and the eggs had never been incubated.

On two or three different occasions, we watched one of the little Western Grebes cut his way out of the shell and liberate himself. The wall of his prison is quite thick for a chick to penetrate, but after he gets his bill thru in one place, he goes at the task like clock work and it only takes him about half an hour after he has smelled the fresh air to liberate himself. After the first hole, he turns himself a little and begins hammering in a new place and he keeps this



NEST OF WESTERN GREBE; ONE EGG SHOWS CIRCULAR ROW OF NICKS, AND IS ALMOST READY TO HATCH

up till he has made a complete revolution in his shell, and the end or cap of the egg, cut clear around, drops off, and the youngster soon kicks himself out into the sunshine. It does not take his coat long to dry; in fact, he often does not give it a chance, for his first impulse seems to be to take to water and ride on his mother's or father's back. The grebe chick never stays in the nest longer than a few hours.



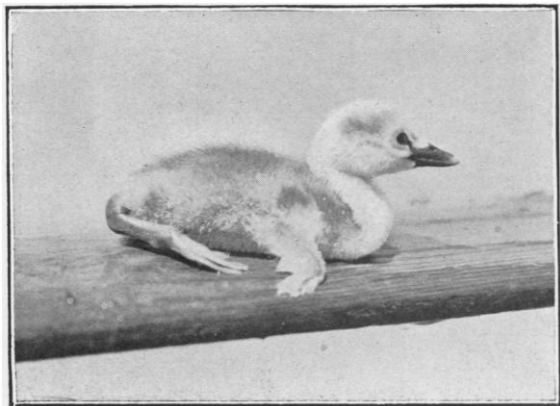
THE NEAR BIRD IS CARRYING A CHICK ON ITS BACK,
THE HEAD OF THE YOUNGSTER JUST SHOWING

A chick that is just hatched is clothed in the most delicate coat of soft gray fur, lighter below and darker on top.

A grebe is one of the shyest of all birds to photograph, for at the slightest sound or motion, it disappears like a flash. He stays under water quite a while, and next time he appears he is probably fifty yards away. For two different days we sneaked about at the edge of the water in the high tules and tried for pictures of these birds. We had to part the reeds and build them up about us so that we were completely hidden and had only a narrow place out of which we could aim our

camera. It took patience to sit there in a squatted position for hours at a time. The chances for pictures were often few and far between; but we had good opportunities to study these wild and wary birds. We could see many things with the eye, by watching thru the thick reeds, that could not be caught with the camera.

The first day, as I lay hidden in the tules waiting for a picture, I saw a pair of grebes swimming along only twenty feet distant. I could catch glimpses of them as they passed just beyond their nest. One of the birds carried



YOUNG WESTERN GREBE LIFTED OUT OF WATER
ON END OF OAR

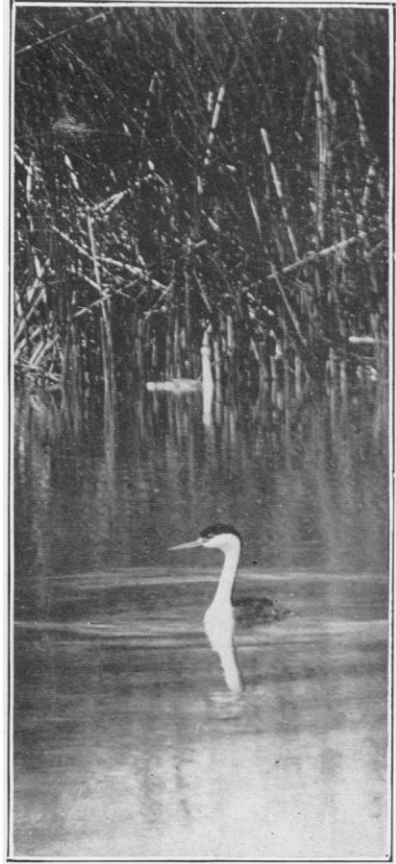
a chick on its back. The grebes have a way of taking their young with them, for the little fellows lie on the back just under the wing-coverts with only the head sticking out. At the slightest alarm, the mother raises the feathers a trifle and covers the chick completely. One can readily tell when a grebe has a chick on

her back even if it is not visible, because she generally swims higher in the water.

As I was lying low in the reeds, another pair of grebes swam past. The back of one bird was high out of the water. She was carrying two young, but at the time neither was visible. But soon one of the youngsters got anxious to crawl out on the hurricane deck, as it were. Each time his head appeared, the mother would reach back and cover him up. Finally one of the little fellows crawled clear out in full view and she let him sit there for a moment. But I could see this was not the customary way of riding, for she soon raised her wing and covered him. Occasionally she picked up bits of something from the surface and reaching back, fed her babies. A little later, while the father was swimming near by, I saw one chick slip off the mother's back and go paddling toward him. He seemed to lower his body slightly in the water and the youngster floated aboard.

The old grebes dive and swim readily under water with the young on their backs. But occasionally when they are frightened, they lose their chicks. Several times while we were rowing about the Lake, we came unexpectedly upon old grebes that were carrying young. At such times, when the old birds are scared, it seems very difficult for them to hold the chicks in place when they dive. In most cases, the young birds come to the top of the water after the mother dives. When we approached the little fellows they tried to dive, but could not stay under long or go very deep, so they were easily caught.

Portland, Oregon.



ADULT WESTERN GREBE

NESTING HABITS OF PHAINOPEPLA NITENS

By HARRIET WILLIAMS MYERS

ON the evening of June ninth, 1906, I came upon a female Phainopepla engaged in catching insects from the top of a tall sycamore tree that grew part way up the bank of the Arroyo Seco at Garvanza. Her mate was equally busy building a nest in a small, half dead sycamore tree not far away. The nest, which was probably half finished, was placed about twelve feet from the ground in an upright crotch formed by the main trunk and a small limb. It was in plain